DAWN

OPINION

Troubling events

DARKNESS has descended over next-door Iran, where widespread, violent protests refuse to abate, posing the most serious governance and security challenges to the government in recent memory. With a nearly complete communications blackout in place, it has been difficult to obtain verifiable information from the country, and with various global powers taking increasingly assertive positions in the ongoing unrest, it is almost impossible to discern facts from propaganda in international reportage on Iran's unfolding crisis. We do know that, on Saturday, the Iranian army issued a statement saying it would safeguard strategic infrastructure and public property, while urging Iranians to "thwart the enemy's plots". Clearly, things have reached a point where the protests are being seen as a national security threat. Inflammatory rhetoric from American leaders, including the US president, has not helped and, indeed, may have put Iranians in greater jeopardy by fanning paranoia.

There have been concerning reports of state buildings being set on fire, and both protesters and security forces being killed in clashes. Educational institutions have reportedly been closed in the worst-affected areas. The current situation represents a dramatic escalation from about two weeks ago, when the protests had begun in response to soaring inflation. The agitation gradually turned political, with the protesters calling for the leadership to step down, expressing dissatisfaction in violent ways. It bears remembering that Iran has been subjected to crippling sanctions for decades, most recently over its nuclear programme. Yet, despite facing extreme adversity, the Iranian leadership and, indeed, its people, have clung to their sense of national pride and refused to let others dictate terms to them. It seems that the war with Israel last year left the country weakened. How this challenge is navigated will be a test for the Iranian people.

There is, of course, much for Pakistan to be concerned about, given that Iran is an adjacent neighbour and also a 'brotherly' nation. The uprising there cannot simply be considered an internal matter. Given the actors involved and the global forces seeking an opening, Pakistan must remain wary of how things unfold, as it will want to avoid any situation that brings another global conflict to its doorstep. That said, this remains a matter for the Iranian people to resolve. The ruling class must identify and accept its mistakes, and move to address them decisively and transparently. It must win back the trust of those protesting or accommodate their demands to avoid a further meltdown. Meanwhile, the Iranian people must remain wary of those exploiting their divisions while posing as friends. Ultimately, a nation must decide what is best for it by itself.

Suffocating existence

A NEW report by the UN strips away whatever little ambiguity remained around Israel's conduct in occupied West Bank. For the first time, a UN rights chief has explicitly described Israel's system of rule as resembling apartheid — a serious designation, but one that Palestinians have endured for decades. The report speaks of a "systematic asphyxiation" of Palestinian rights, an apt phrase for a reality in which daily life is suffocated by discriminatory laws and practices. From access to water and education to healthcare and livelihoods, Palestinians in the West Bank exist under a system designed to privilege Israeli settlers while dehumanising the indigenous community. Two people living on the same land are governed by two entirely different legal systems: civil law for settlers, military law for Palestinians. The result is predictable. Land confiscation, home demolitions, detention, trials in military courts, and escalating settler violence often carried out with the support of Israeli security forces. That this situation has now been labelled 'apartheid' by the UN is significant, but hardly revelatory. Independent experts, human rights groups and Palestinians themselves have long warned that segregation and domination are not accidental byproducts of occupation but its very purpose. The West Bank has become an experiment of repression where Palestinian existence is tolerated only as long as it remains compliant and invisible. Equally damning is the context in which this report arrives. Just months ago, a separate UN inquiry described Israel's actions in Gaza as genocidal. Yet, as with countless resolutions and condemnations before, little has changed on the ground. Babies in Gaza continue to die from cold and malnutrition. Cancer patients perish for lack of treatment. Civilians are killed with impunity, shot in the head, bombed in their homes, starved behind blockades, while the world debates semantics.

Israel dismissed the report as "absurd and distorted". But denial has long been its first line of defence, enabled by powerful allies. The real absurdity lies in the international community's response: outrage followed by inaction. The suffering of Palestinians continues as though they are, indeed, children of a lesser god undeserving of the rights, dignity and protection afforded to others. The UN's words must be followed by consequences.

Cricket concerns

SCHEDULE uncertainty persists at yet another multilateral cricket tournament to be held in South Asia. Once again, it involves India, which has been intent on throwing its weight around. This time, though, it is getting a taste of its own medicine. Less than a month before the Twenty20 World Cup is set to be played in India and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh have cited security reservations over travelling to India. The Bangladesh Cricket Board is, instead, in a discussion with the International Cricket Council about playing its matches in Sri Lanka. Its concerns have been triggered on account of worsening Dhaka-New Delhi ties and the recent events related to its fast bowler Mustafizur Rehman. Mustafizur had been signed by the Indian Premier League side Kolkata Knight Riders, only for the Board of Control for Cricket in India to ask the team to release him due to "recent developments". The move sparked a furore in Dhaka, which banned the broadcast of the IPL in the country and asked the ICC to shift its World Cup matches from India. Its argument is that when India cannot ensure Mustafizur's safety, the only Bangladeshi played snapped up in the IPL auction, how can it guarantee the security of the entire team.

The World Cup, beginning on Feb 7, is set for geopolitical strains again after Pakistan-India tensions eased with an arrangement which sees both teams play their matches at neutral venues during tournaments held in either country. Pakistan will play their World Cup games in Sri Lanka, just like India played their Champions Trophy matches in the UAE last year. India has cited security concerns for not sending its team to Pakistan. Now, it has to address Bangladesh's similar concerns. It is imperative for the ICC, led by former Indian cricket supremo Jay Shah, to make an impartial decision instead of forcing Bangladesh to play in India.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

'Good night and good luck'

Political and media landscapes are witnessing their own version of McCarthyism.

MCCARTHYISM is a ghost that survives within political and institutional systems. It thrives on witch-hunts, rejects scrutiny, and shields itself with distorted logic, manufactured fears, and convenient lies. It brands itself as the custodian of 'true patriotism', while relegating all dissenters to the category of the less loyal. Today, this spectre is once again dominating parts of the world, including the US and Pakistan.

George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* captures this phenomenon by revisiting the confrontation between journalist Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950s. The term 'McCarthyism' itself emerged from the senator's methods, which included wild accusations hurled without proof, careers destroyed on suspicion, and a climate of fear promoted to silence critical voices.

Yet the film does not unfold McCarthy's character as much as it peels back the layers of the newsroom. It shows how editorial boundaries, commercial pressures, and fear of losing business gradually suffocate journalistic courage. It reminds us that compromises do not arrive abruptly but creep in quietly. But it also shows that there is always a way out, a path that begins with vigilance, integrity and the refusal to accept intimidation.

Though set in the 1950s, *Good Night, and Good Luck* resonates with today's local scenario in which political and media landscapes are witnessing their own version of McCarthyism where narratives are policed, loyalties questioned and fear weaponised. The film invites us to reflect not only on history, but on our own moment.

An op-ed piece cannot do a full film review, and there is no plan to act as spoiler for those who have the film on their watch list. However, Cole Porter's famous 1940s' song, *I've Got My Eyes On You,* which also has the line 'I'm checking all you do from A to Z' has been masterfully used in the film and one can easily understand the context.

These are difficult times for journalism, especially the kind that once stood firmly against McCarthyism. The challenge intensifies when the media landscape drifts towards sensationalism and embraces the notion, as referenced in the film, that 'yellow is better than red'. Those who attempt to expose strong-arm tactics today face familiar reprisals: loss of advertisements, government pressure, accusations of being unpatriotic, and even direct threats.

Yet vigilance makes all the difference. Logic, objectivity and professional reporting covering all essential angles of a story remain possible, though not without hardship. Whether in Gaza during Israel's genocidal campaign against Palestinians, the recent events in Venezuela or the tragic incident in Minneapolis that law enforcement and President Donald Trump attempted to cover up, segments of the media have continued to perform their professional responsibilities despite immense pressure.

The world over, those subscribing to the tenets of McCarthyism, in every age, remain obsessed with the idea that hidden forces or subversive actors are out to destroy a nation. They believe only a coercive approach can confront such imagined threats. Witch-hunts become their tool; 'witchcraft' their political art. For those unfamiliar with the origins of this mentality, Europe's experience between the 15th and 17th centuries is instructive. That era saw widespread accusations of witchcraft amid political instability, famine, disease, economic crises, and religious conflict. The clergy scapegoated 'witches' — mostly poor women — and Heinrich Kramer, a priest, authored the *Hammer of Witches*, a manual that claimed that the devil targeted women, especially those who defied husbands and social norms. Kramer weaponised fear with pseudo-logic, legitimising the witch trials that haunted Europe for nearly two centuries.

The 'McCarthyism' of any age depends on the same logic of 'witchcraft' and witch trials. If journalists or media groups anywhere come under pressure, the reason is often simple: they are challenging the McCarthyism of their time.

Pakistan has a long history of confronting a similar state-led approach — from sanctions and censorship under the Press and Publications Ordinance of 1960, which empowered the state to shut down newspapers and arrest journalists, to the pre-publication censorship imposed during the Bhutto and Zia regimes, and later the clampdowns, bans, and channel closures witnessed under Nawaz Sharif and Gen Pervez Musharraf. Since then, restrictions have only become more layered, whether under the PTI government or the PDM-led administrations.

Although a large proportion of media groups and even well-known journalists have compromised at various stages, a small but resilient community of journalists, along with a few strong-nerved media owners, has continued to challenge these pressures. Zameer Niazi documented much of this struggle, but in recent years, two important accounts have emerged from senior journalist Hussain Naqi. The first is his memoir, *Mujh Se Jo Ho Saka*, and the second is a compilation of an extended interview conducted by Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed, published under the title *Jurat-i-Inkaar.* Both works capture not only Naqi's personal journey but also the collective struggle that defines Pakistan's political, social and journalistic history over the last seven decades.

This is, in many ways, a Pakistani version of *Good Night and Good Luck*, a narrative that deserves equal praise and could well be adapted into a screenplay. Hussain Naqi's story makes one truth abundantly clear: subscribers to the McCarthy approach in successive Pakistani regimes have believed that the media is responsible for creating political instability and chaos. They succeeded in silencing the press for years, sometimes for entire decades, yet the country never escaped chronic instability.

Instead of reassessing their approach, they continue to rely on the same tactic of suppressing dissent, a strategy that has never produced the desired outcomes, nor is likely to in the future. The title of the film is borrowed from the famous line in *Romeo and Juliet*, 'Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow". But the film also subtly invokes another Shakespearean truth: "The fault … is not in our stars, but in ourselves." ■

The writer is a security analyst.

BY ABBAS NASIR

Living in interesting times

SINCE the so-called rules-based order is crumbling in whatever flawed form it existed, those with power are asserting themselves in the most unbridled of ways, with the only restraining factor being power itself or its quantum at the disposal of one player or the other.

The phenomenon is not limited to the big powers' actions on the global stage but is mirrored by developments in the region and even within countries, with domestic politics being shaped by the 'might is right' principle, if it can be called a principle. The resultant scenario is scary to say the least.

This must be the reason that some of the 'rattled' middle-ranking economic-military powers are now forging alliances and concluding pacts so that their collective strength or power enables them to better negotiate the challenges and come out relatively unscathed from the reshaping of the world that seem underway. Let me get into the specifics.

The US-backed Israeli attack started against the around two million Palestinians in the tiny and largely defenceless Gaza Strip ostensibly triggered by the October 2023 Hamas attack. It has continued, despite the murder of thousands of civilians including children, in the face of worldwide demonstrations and calls for an immediate ceasefire by international institutions such as the UN. (In fact, the US sanctioned International Criminal Court judges and its prosecutor examining war crimes charges against Israeli leaders.)

But the October Hamas attack was only an excuse, as before the brutal Gaza bombing campaign was over, Israel also attacked Lebanon, annexed more of the Syrian Golan Heights and not just attacked Iran itself but also sucked in the US to bomb Iranian nuclear sites (by this time Donald Trump had moved into the White House).

This was the beginning of the reshaping of the Middle East, the move towards the realisation of the 'Greater Israel' dream. Those still defiant and seen as obstacles were attacked too like the Houthis in Yemen; allies were encouraged to increase their influence and footprint in non-Houthi-controlled parts of Yemen from sites overlooking the Red Sea water routes in the southwest to the northeast of the country.

The fighting in Sudan and the Israeli recognition of Somaliland across the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa are aimed at the same strategic objective: to have oversight of shipping routes south of the Suez Canal whether for transport of oil or other essential supplies.

But in the power game, even states with smaller militaries can apply economic levers effectively to be heard. And this assumes greater significance in the 'transactional' Trump era. So when the Israelis attacked targets on Qatari soil, it was seen as an overreach by even those countries in the region which restricted their reaction to lodging verbal protests during the Gaza genocide.

It also brought home the truth that American bases and troops on their soil were not there for their protection but served US interests and were there to project US power. This led to a flurry of activity and saw a defence pact inked between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Now a Bloomberg report suggests, citing unnamed sources, that Turkiye may join the pact too.

> Against the international backdrop, Pakistani foreign policy has so far delivered well.

Of late, Saudi Arabia has reasserted its power and re-established itself as the main backer of forces in the non-Houthi parts of Yemen, bombing and evicting the South Transitional Council from areas the latter had taken over from the Saudi-backed Yemeni government in Sanaa after rebelling from the governing coalition.

Zooming out of the region, we can see the US reviving the Monroe Doctrine (Trump has rechristened it the 'Donroe doctrine') and applying it to Venezuela, after kidnapping its president and his spouse on the flimsiest of charges, some of which were amended between their snatching in Caracas and their indictment a day later in New York City.

Trump says the US will "run Venezuela" now, having left the regime in place, after an apparent deal with interim president Delcy Rodr guez and will sell their oil to who he likes but the country itself cannot sell oil, for example, to China, Cuba and Russia.

Donald Trump is also making similar noises about 'hitting' other South American countries, such as Colombia and Mexico, whose leaders do not conform to his (far) right-wing worldview. He also keeps repeating his desire to take over Greenland one way or another. Given the collapse of the rules-based order and US military might, who knows what he does next.

No different is the use of military power by Russia to make inroads into Ukrainian territory. Ukraine is a country that gave up its nuclear arsenal after the collapse of the Soviet Union primarily on account of US security guarantees.

Now under Trump, the US is telling Ukraine to pretty much forget about its lost territory and do a peace deal with Russia. It has nearly halted all military aid to Ukraine and also told Nato states in Europe that they must step up their defence spending dramatically because the leader of the so-called Free World is done underwriting their defence.

Against this backdrop, one must say, Pakistani foreign policy has so far delivered well with the three major world military powers the US, China and Russia seemingly onside, along with the well-resourced Gulf states. With Pakistan responding robustly and effectively to an Indian attempt to project power in South Asia by missile attacks on Pakistani soil without legal justification in May last year, Islamabad's stock has risen in the world.

With the rules-based order becoming more of an irrelevance, Pakistan too appears to be taking inspiration from how domestic dissent particularly over Gaza has been handled in the US and Europe. Perhaps, Pakistan feels that when established democracies can get away with it, why shouldn't a hybrid government? The answer is some distance away. The old order may be crumbling but what will rise from its ashes is still to take concrete shape. ■

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